學術討論

Hou Zhi 侯芝 (1764–1829), Poet and *Tanci* 彈詞 Writer

Ellen Widmer*

The name Hou Zhi (also known as Ruzhi 如芝, studio name Xiangye ge 香葉閣) is of interest today because of her contributions to the development of *tanci*. The editor of the first published version of Chen Duansheng's 陳端生*Zaisheng yuan* 再生緣 (1821), Hou is also credited with her editorial or authorial work on four other titles: *Jinshang hua* 錦上花 (1813), *Jingui jie* 金閨傑(1824, a revised version of *Zaisheng yuan*), *Zaizao tian* 再造天 (preface 1826, pub. 1828) and *Yuchuan yuan* 玉釧緣. *Yuchuan yuan* survives in a re-editions only, and all that is known about its publication date is that Hou had worked on it before she published *Zaisheng yuan*. This one learns from the 1821 preface to *Zaisheng yuan*, which mentions the other titles and further asserts that Hou had been working on *tanci* for about ten years. If one were to take this literally, it would mean that she began her involvement with *tanci* in 1811.

* Professor, Department of Asian Languages and Literatures, Wesleyan University

近代中國婦女史研究 第 5 期（1997 年 8 月）
© 中央研究院近代史研究所

Hu Shiying's 胡士瑩 well researched biography of Hou uses the prefaces of *tanci*, local histories, and other sources to construct a life history for this literary pioneer.① Drawing on materials of which Hu was unaware, I propose now to supplement his findings and, in some cases, to make minor revisions of the data he has set down. The materials on which I base my argument consist, in the main, of Hou's preface, probably written in 1811, to a collection of Jiang Zhu's 江珠 poems, *Xiaoweimo shiji* 小維摩詩集, which is held in the Beijing Library; her poems and letter to Lo Qilan 駱綺蘭, preserved in a collection edited by Lo entitled *Tingqiuguan guizhong tongrenji* 聽秋館閨中同人集 and dated 1797, which is held in the Nanjing Library; and a cluster of materials linked to Wang Yu's 王豫 *Qunya ji* 群雅集 (second collection), which was published in 1811. This collection is held in the Naikaku bunko. Incidental references to Hou in Fa-shi-shan's 法式善 *Wumen shihua* 梧門詩話② and Wang Qiong's 王瓊 preface to a selection of poems by Jin Ruolan 金若蘭 entitled *Huayuxuan shichao* 花語軒詩鈔, will also be brought in.③ Wang Qiong's preface to Jin's collection was written in 1811. Fa-shi-shan's collection cannot be precisely dated, but it had to have been completed by the time of the author's death in 1813. I shall proceed by introducing the three main sources one by one before addressing some general questions about what led Hou Zhi to take up writing *tanci* and how she managed to publish in this genre.

Hou's preface to Jiang Zhu's *Xiaoweimo shi ji* is the most biographically

① "Tanci nü zuojia Hou Zhi xiaozhuan," *Wenxian* 15 (1983), pp. 87–93.

② Shen Yunlong, ed., *Jindai zhongguo shiliao congkan xubian* 20, vol. 198, Taibei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1975.

③ Jin's original collection is entitled *Huayuxuan shichao* and is dated 1807. It is held in the Library of Congress. *Huayuxuan shixuan*, a selection of the above, is held in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Library (Literature collection), Beijing. It is dated 1811.

revealing of the sources noted above.④ A member of the group known as the "Ten Women of Wu (Wuzhong shizi) 吳中十子,"⑤ Jiang came from Suzhou and was celebrated for her skill at poetry as well as for her learning in other fields. She was the younger sister of the scholar Jiang Fan 江藩 (1761–1831) and belonged to Yuan Mei's 袁枚 circle of female disciples, although illness kept her from participating regularly in meetings.⑥

As far as can be ascertained, Hou never met Jiang face-to-face. This could be the reason that so much of Hou's preface is devoted to self-revelation. It observes that she was taught to read by her "elder brother" (actually a cousin), Hou Yunjin 雲錦, despite the views of her father, who believed that lack of talent in a woman was a virtue. After her marriage to Mei Chong 梅冲, a poor but rather successful scholar,⑦ household chores kept her from writing for many years. Her most famous child, Mei Zengliang 曾亮 (1786–1856), was born during her long period of literary inactivity. In 1794 Hou was seized by serious illness. Writing proved therapeutic, for it was something she had always loved to do, and it gave her the means to stabilize her extremes of fever and chill. With Hou Yunjin and her other brothers' help, she came in contact with women

---

④ Other prefaces to this collection are by her brother Jiang Fan, Chen Xie 陳燮, Xu Yu 徐煜, and the woman poet Gui Maoyi 歸懋儀.

⑤ The names and publications of the ten may be found in Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao*, rev. èd, Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1985. A discussion of this group is found in Dorothy Ko, "A Man Teaching Ten Women: A Case in the Making of Gender Relations in Eighteenth-Century China," *Yanagida Setsuko sensei koki kinen ronsh/u hensh/u i-inkai, ed, Ch/ugoku no dent/o shakai to kazoku (Society and Family in Traditional China)*, Tokyo: Ky/uko shoin, 1993, pp. 65–93.

⑥ Goyama Kiwamu, "En Bai to jodeishi tachi," *Bungaku ronsh/u*, 31 (August, 1985), pp. 113–54. I am grateful to Dorothy Ko for supplying me with a copy of this source.

⑦ Mei Chong passed the *juren* examination. According to Hu Shiying's sources, the Mei family had a history of being brilliant but poor, see p. 89.

writers "up and down the river," and through their exchanges of verses began hearing of Jiang Zhu. Later, Hou lost track of her. Some ten years later, her youngest brother⑧ presented her with a volume of Jiang's posthumous writings and asked her to write a preface. Jiang's husband Wu Xuehai 吾學海, it turned out, was Hou's youngest brother's close friend.

Hou's preface concludes with her ruminations on the coincidence that she and Jiang were born in the same year. This prompts her to speculate that Jiang's superior talent might have provoked the jealousy of "the creator," who saw fit to return her early to the Taoist paradise from which she had come. According to a postscript to the collection by Wu Xuehai, Jiang was born in 1764 and died in 1804. Coupled with Hou's observation that she and Jiang were born in the same year, this allows us to conclude that Hou, too, was born in 1764. Hu Shiying arrives at his assertion that Hou was born in 1760 by extrapolating from her husband's age.⑨ The evidence provided in the materials attached to Jiang Zhu's collection permit greater precision on this matter, allowing us to conclude that her life span extended from 1764 to 1829, with death coming at age 66 sui.⑩

Like her father, *jinshi* Hou Xueshi 學詩, Hou's husband Mei Chong dwelt in Jiangning (Nanjing), although the Mei family were originally from

---

⑧ Hou uses the name Qingting 慶庭 for this brother. According to Hu Shiying, Hou had two brothers, the noted scholar Hou Yunsong 雲松 (1765–1853), and Hou Yunshi 雲石. Either may have been known as Qingting, but the evidence gives no indication that this is so.

⑨ p. 93.

⑩ Several sources set Hou's date of death in 1830. However, Hu Shiying is quite correct in his assertion that Mei Zengliang, writing in 1832, mentioned that his mother's death had taken place three years earlier. See Mei's *Baijian shanfang wenji* 柏梘山房文集, 5, *Zhonghua wenshi congshu* 154–55, Taibei: Huawenshuju, 1969, p. 208.

Xin'an.[11] This meant that Hou lived her whole life in Nanjing, one reason she may not have met Jiang Zhu, who resided in Suzhou. She had better luck with Lo Qilan, one of the best known and most peripatetic woman poets of the day. Early widowed, Lo moved hither and yon in pursuit of satisfactory mentoring relationships with such men as Wang Wenzhi 王文治 (1730–1802), Zeng Ao 曾燠 (1760–1831), and Yuan Mei (1716–97). Lo's *Tingqiuguan guizhong tongrenji*, which she edited in 1797, was devised to provide an unwonted publishing opportunity for her women friends.[12] It contains well over a dozen poems and one letter from Hou to Lo, as well as two poems from Lo to Hou. Lo's collected poems of 1795, by contrast, offer no indication that she and Hou were friends.[13] If Hou did indeed make her first contacts with other women poets after becoming ill in 1794, as her preface to Jiang Zhu's work indicates, this might explain the fact that she is not mentioned in Lo's collection of 1795. Hou's letter to Lo in *Tingqiuguan guizhong tongrenji* observes that she and Lo were in touch for two years before they actually met. The meeting took place during one of Mei Chong's trips to the ancestral home in Huizhou, whereupon Hou sent some poems to Lo, via her cousin Hou Hunjin. Lo eventually responded by letter, then came to visit Hou in Nanjing. She was probably residing in Zhenjiang at the time. After their initial meeting, the two continued to exchange poems, paintings, and letters, and otherwise maintained contact over the next several years.

Tingqiuguan guizhong tongrenji establishes that most of Lo's network of women friends were disciples of Yuan Mei or Wang Wenzhi. It also details several occasions on which Lo visited these women in their home

---

⑪ Hu Shiying, pp. 87, 89.

⑫ The preface to this collection explains the reasoning behind it. See Hu Wenkai, pp. 939–40.

⑬ This collection is entitled *Tingqiuguan shiji*. It is held in Harvard-Yenching Library.

towns or traveled with them to scenic spots in places like Yangzhou. This evidence points to a community of women, perhaps with Lo at its center, which may have orbited around male luminaries, but which had its own, independent dynamics. For example, some of Hou's poems to Lo were "written after" those of other women writers, such as Wang Qiong of Dantu, who was a granddaughter of Wang Wenzhi and a minor disciple of Yuan Mei.⑭ Surprisingly, Hou herself did not know Yuan, even though both lived in Nanjing and although her husband was one of Yuan's senior disciples.⑮ The late date at which Hou began reaching out to other literary women may explain her rather curious failure to connect with Yuan Mei, who died in 1797; but it is just as likely that Hou chose to keep her distance. Fa-shi-shan notes the strikingly Confucian tone of Hou's poetry,⑯ and one can hardly fail to observe the same emphasis in her *tanci.* Given Yuan Mei's somewhat dubious reputation from a Confucian standpoint, Hou may have preferred to eschew contact with Lo's mentor, even as she sought contact with Lo.

Hu Shiying's account mentions that Hou took part in poetry groups with women, but he offers no data on her tie to either Jiang Zhu or Lo Qilan. Hou's relationship with the one woman friend Hu mentions specifically, Wang Naide 王迺德, can now be set in an enhanced context, thanks to the third set of materials mentioned above. These include the collection *Qunya ji*, edited by Wang Naide's father Wang Yu (1768–1826) in 1807 and 1811, the second collection of which contains a biographical

---

⑭ On Wang Qiong, see Goyama, pp. 131–2.

⑮ "[Mei Chong] was one of [Yuan Mei's] senior disciples, but [Yuan] died without having seen any of her poems; even so, one can see their high quality," *Wumen shihua*, p. 600. Mei Chong's status as Yuan's associate is confirmed by his inclusion in Yuan's "Xu tongrenji 續同人集," (Yanji lei 3b–4a). See *Suiyuan quanji* 隋園全集, Shanghai: Wenming shuju, 1918.

⑯ Fa-shi-shan, *Wumen shihua*, pp. 598–9.

entry on and eight poems by Hou Zhi; *Ailanxuan shixuan* 愛蘭軒詩選, a collection of writings by Wang Yu's sister Wang Qiong, one of whose several prefaces is by Hou Zhi;⑰ and Wang Naide's own poetry collection, *Zhujingxuan shixuan* 竹淨軒詩選, which is published alongside *Ailanxuan shixuan*, and collections by her sister Wang Nairong 王迺容 and their in-law Ji Fang 季芳.⑱ Among both Wang Qiong's and Wang Naide's writings are poems addressed to Hou Zhi. This quadripartite collection is appended to the second collection of *Qunya ji* in the Naikaku bunko but is not attached to other copies. One final addendum to this group of writings is a set of poems from a single meeting of women poets that took place near Wang Qiong's studio in 1806. Entitled *Qujiangting changheshi* 曲江亭唱和詩 (prefaces 1808) it is one of the sources on which Fa-shi-shan relies.⑲

These sources establish that it was Wang Qiong, rather than Wang Naide who was Hou Zhi's primary friend. Wang Qiong was quite important as an editor of women's poetry. Working alongside her brother Wang Yu, she was chief editor of the several *juan* of poems by women in *Qunya ji*. In addition, she published a set of critical writings of her own, *Mingyuan shihua* 名媛詩話, which is no longer extant, but which is heavily quoted in *Qunya ji*. This editorial activity enhanced her prominence among women poets in her vicinity, which meant in turn that she was called upon to write prefaces to collections of poetry by women. It is also clear that she sponsored Wang Naide, Wang Nairong, and Ji Fang at various gatherings of women poets, among them the one celebrated in *Qujiangting*

⑰ The others are by Zhang Fen 張芬, one of the "Ten Women of Wu" and Jin Yi 金逸, a prominent disciple of Yuan Mei.

⑱ These last are entitled *Huantong ge shixuan* 浣桐閣詩選 and *Huancuige shixuan* 環翠閣詩選. The date of the original compendium is 1807, on which see Hu Wenkai, p. 853.

⑲ *Wumen shihua*, p. 596.

changhe ji, which was prompted by a visit to Wang Qiong by the wives and concubines of Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849). Wang Qiong's preface to this work represents it as the output of a portion of a still larger group of women poets, many of whom had either died or moved away. Hou Zhi and Lo Qilan are both listed as absent (but not dead) when the Qujiang group reconvened.

Apart from their shared membership in configurations of women poets associated with Lo Qilan and Wang Qiong, Hou Zhi and Wang Qiong were linked by personal friendship. The two enjoyed at least one face-to-face meeting, probably in Qujiang, and their friendship continued long beyond their first meeting. Hou's preface to Wang's *Ailanxuan shixuan* mentions that she has not seen Wang in some time, while poems to Hou by Wang confirm that their friendship continued over at least ten years of separation. In the mean time, contact was expedited by Hou's cousin Hou Yunjin, who, along with her husband Mei Chong, pursued studies at Zhenjiang in the company of Wang Qiong's brother Wang Yu. It was thanks to Hou Yunjin that Hou Zhi first received a copy of Wang Qiong's collected poems, to which she added her preface. Through such contacts, as well as letters poems, paintings, and other forms of exchange, Wang Qiong was well aware of Hou's illness and worried about it. Her poems, and those of her niece, also comment more generally on how much they missed and thought about Hou.

It is obvious that Wang Qiong regarded Hou as a paragon among the forty or fifty women poets of her acquaintance.[20] The biographical notice in *Qunya ji* mentions Hou's unusually wide reading, and it underscores the moral emphasis in her poetry. More telling, because less obviously flattering, is Wang's preface to the work of another woman poet, Jin Ruolan, in which she uses Hou and one other woman poet as the standard

---

[20] This span of numbers is mentioned in her preface to poems by Jin Ruolan.

of excellence by which Jin's accomplishment could be measured. To Fa-shi-shan, as well, the erudition and the Confucian tone of her poetry were outstanding.

> [Few women poets write from a background of real knowledge. These include] Jiangning's Hou Zhi, who has read widely in the classics, and whose learning is influenced by the idea of principle without corruption and plainness without decadence, which is drawn from Cheng-Zhu Confucianism. Her poems are enough to infuse sincerity into what is customary and instruct in what is proper. Wang Qiong's *Mingyuan shihua* praises her as a model to other women.㉑

Much of what Hou wrote to her women friends seems unremarkable, but her poems to her often absent husband may be the basis for Fa-shi-shan's high praise. They detail the conscientious spirit in which she cared for his parents and raised his children, despite severe poverty, which forced her to pawn her own clothes. This poem is entitled "Answering my Husband:" ("Dawai" 答外)

> Being a wife is always a matter of serving one's relations,
> 作婦從來在事親
> I dare not complain about working hard to take care of your parents.
> 敢將菽水語辛勤
> My offerings of food are insufficient, they lack complexity of taste.
> 奉匜養缺無兼饌
> Planting millet, our family is poor, we can only concoct thin wine.
> 種秫家貧只薄醺
> I take it hard that there is so little surplus.
> 負米自難餘擔石

㉑ *Wumen shihua*, p. 599.

After going to the pawnshop, I'm lucky still to have a skirt to wear.
典錢猶幸有衣裙
The trivial business of the women's quarters is all like this.
閨中細事皆如此
Please bear with me as I pour out my frustrations in talking with you.
忍把窮愁說與君

The following poem was written on the return of her husband from Suzhou:

Your two parents are both happy and healthy.
雙親且喜俱強健
Your children are roughly familiar with simple writing.
兒女粗能諳簡篇
It is our household principle that frugality makes honesty.
儉以養廉家有訓
When you write you often rail against fate, but all is up to Heaven.
文常憎命事由天
You are without illness, we must recognize our good fortune.
身無疾病須知福
Your job is a literary one. We're already very favored.
座列詩書即是仙
As long as we receive daily necessities without missing a day,
但得虀鹽無缺日
We can consider that spring is at out door.[22]
春風也算到門前

These poems are not cited in Hu Shiying's article, but they overlap themat-

---

[22] *Qunya ji 2* 37:2a, lb. The first half of a similar poem was singled out for inclusion in Chen Shi 陳詩, ed., *Wanya chuji* 皖雅初集, Shanghai: Lujiang Chenshi, 1932 19:29b, an a· .iology of poets from Anhui. Hou is included in the collection by virtue of her marriage into the Mei family. Ironically, this collection does not cite the work of her husband, Mei Chong.

ically with other evidence he cites about the straightened circumstances of Hou's household, her husband being often absent, which he derives from comments by her celebrated son Mei Zengliang.

Another comment, this time by Hou's brother Hou Yunsong appears in a poem to Hou's daughter, where he remarks on how much his sister resembles their mother. The points of similarity he mentions are her penchant for hard work, her tact, and her frugality:

> You have both good fortune and literacy,
> 汝既備文福
> Your nature is very much like your mother's.
> 性尤似母氏
> You have the ability to handle large family matters,
> 事能務其大
> Harmonizing the clan, you link those who are near.
> 睦族聯其邇
> In matters of money, you know when to be frugal,
> 用財酌豐儉
> Toward those of lower status, you manage them respectfully.
> 御下肅綱紀
> You labor hard and refuse no task.
> 勞瘁百不辭
> You pacify those who are at odds over matters of virtue.
> 德怨兩俱弭
> Everyone regards you as supremely talented.
> 人人謂賢能
> No one among your contemporaries can compare with you.[23]
> 儔輩惡可比

Nowhere in any of this material is there any mention of Hou's work

[23] Hu Shiying, pp. 90–1.

on *tanci*, the chief reason for her interest to scholarship today. As noted earlier, Hou's first known published *tanci* appeared in print in 1813. Assuming that it took two years to complete one *tanci*,㉔ it is possible that her work in this medium overlapped in time with or followed closely after her poems to Wang Qiong. It may also have overlapped with the preface to Wang Qiong's *Ailanxuan shixuan*, as well as the preface to Jiang Zhu's *Xiaoweimo shiji*.

In her 1821 preface to *Zaisheng yuan*, Hou explains that when she began to write *tanci* ten years earlier she gave up writing poetry, thinking that *tanci* were a surer route to fame. With the possible exception of the few prefaces noted above, the evidence at hand does nothing to contradict the assertion that she gave up her active involvement in poetry in about 1811. The documentation of Hou's relationships with Lo Qilan, Jiang Zhu, and Wang Qiong all dates from no later than that year. One of Hou Zhi's *tanci*, *Jinshang hua* of 1813, carries endorsements, of which two are probably those of Lo and Wang. Another is by Sun Yunfeng 孫雲鳳, one of Yuan Mei's disciples and an associate of Wang Qiong.㉕ These endorsements, if genuine, would suggest that however Hou Zhi's venture into writing and publishing *tanci* may have affected her poetry, it did not cause her to break off relationships with her most prominent literay friends.

In conjunction with the biographical material found within Hou's *tanci*, her prefaces and poems provide a basis for probing other points of interest, such as Hou's relationship with the commercial publishers who put out her *tanci* and her negotiations with the mores that might have

---

㉔ Another *tanci*, *Yuchuan yuan*, took its author two years to complete. See Siao-chen Hu, "Literary Tanci: A Woman's Tradition of Narrative in Verse," unpublished doctoral dissertation (Harvard University, 1994), p. 53.

㉕ The names Peixiang 佩香 and Biyun 碧雲 which appear in the endorsements are the pen names of Lo and Wang. On Sun Yunfeng see Goyama, pp. 115–6.

discouraged her from authoring them in the first place, let alone circulate them in published form.

As previously noted, the preface to *Zaisheng yuan* explains that Hou's decision to write and publish *tanci* was based on a wish for a surer route to fame than poetry could provide. Hou's hubris, and the frank admission thereof, provide sufficient motivation for this decision, but they do not altogether explain how she overcame the obstacle of a cloistered existence in making contact with publishing firms. Her pride in her role as a Confucian wife makes it difficult to imagine that she approached commercial publishers on her own. The biographical material introduced here provides one way of rationalizing this contradiction, inasmuch as her brothers and cousin were such a source of encouragement and so often the means by which she made contact with the outside world. This is especially true of Hou Yunjin, who not only encouraged her early efforts at reading and writing but also expedited her relationships with literary friends like Lo Qilan and Wang Qiong. Hu Shiying's work shows several other points at which Hou Yunjin was helpful to his cousin, for he served as a tutor to her children, and he gave her comfort by turning out an edition of her poems when she was old and ill. Additionally, he intended, but never managed, to turn out a second volume of her poems after she had died.㉖ Clearly, his patronage of her literary efforts lasted her whole life through. It could easily have been Hou Yunjin who undertook the leg work that allowed her to make contact with commercial publishers while maintaining traditional cloistering at home.

Hou's relationship with her *tanci* publishers can be contrasted with the family-style publishing through which most collections of women's poetry emerged. The firms that published Hou's *tanci* can occasionally be identified as longstanding commercial establishments; and whether or

---

㉖ Hu Shiying, p. 93.

not this is not the case, one can deduce from Hou's reactions that their motives and methods were different from those of family publishers. Her preface to *Jingui jie* complains that the manuscript of *Zaisheng yuan* had been snatched away by a bookshop before she was ready to let go of it:

> I had not finished editing it when the bookseller wanted a preface. I do not like to refuse people's requests, so I cobbled together a few words as a preface without expecting it would be put into circulation.[27]

This alone would indicate that booksellers viewed *Zaisheng yuan* as a hot commodity, in other words, that they envisioned it in response to profitable readerly demand. Hou implies as much at several other points in her comments on *Jingui jie*, for example, when she observes that "as long as women read this over and over, there will certainly be booksellers ready to transmit it."[28] By contrast, Hou Yunjin decision to turn out Hou Zhi's collected poems was motivated by his wish to comfort her in her sickness, or to leave a memorial to her after she had died. Like the vanity publishing of today, it originated in the author's wishes, not in pressure from the "reading public" at large.

Tanci's promise of a wide, if merely popular, audience explains why Hou thought of them as a route to fame. This distinction does nothing to illuminate another issue--the extent to which fame was on her mind. In the context of women's poetic culture, which called for extreme self-effacement, Hou's frank admission of ambition is startling. The truism "lack of talent in a woman is a virtue" was part of the reason that female authors assumed a modest pose. However, Hou appears to have been an old hand at negotiating her way around this truism. As she announces in the preface to Jiang Zhu's poems, she was willing to sidestep family

---

[27] Preface to *Jingui jie*, original in Tsinghua University Library.

[28] Conclusion of chapter 8, *Jingui jie*.

injunctions against female learning during her youth and take Hou Yunjin up on his offer to help her learn. Later in life, again with the help of Hou Yunjin, she sought to educate her daughter, another sign of her less than complete adherence to this conservative idea.[29] Yet the *tanci* themselves, which assume a female audience, impart another message to readers, at times explicitly promoting the lack of talent as virtue theme.[30] Arguably, this was Hou's way of justifying her own endeavor--the fact that her own works endorsed this theme made her negative personal example easier to disguise. In any event, for Hou to have sidestepped conservative convention to write for other literate women is less startling than her active admission that she sought to promote her own name.

The best way of understanding this seeming breech of decorum is as one of the trappings of *tanci* authorship. In contrast to the self-effacing authorial persona that was the norm in women's poetry, *tanci* appear to have called out a bolder stance among their women authors and editors. The anonymous author of *Yuchuan yuan* was another who explained her authorship, in part, as a quest for fame.[31] In point of biographical fact, Hou may indeed have been more ambitious than her female contemporaries, and this ambition may, as she says, have caused her to switch from poetry to *tanci*. On the other hand, her ambition may have been a result rather than a cause of the switch, reflecting *tanci's* different rhetorical demands. For example, *tanci's* great length required a more sustained organizational presence than was usual in poetry. In addition, unlike poetry, *tanci* were a branch of popular literature, one

---

[29] Ibid., p. 90.

[30] On the female audience for *tanci*, see Siao-chen Hu, pp. 4–5. See also Zheng Zhenduo, *Zhongguo suwenxue shi*, Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1957, pp. 370–81 on "women's *tanci*," and Tan Zhengbi, *Zhongguo nüxing wenxue shihua*, Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1984.

[31] Siao-chen Hu, pp. 60–4.

increasingly associated with women writers. In this sense they could be thought of as a womanly preserve. Women writing *tanci* may have felt less apologetic than they did when they wrote poems. Either difference could explain the bolder tone of women writing in this genre.

Hou's long history of illness is another basic biographical fact that takes on a different meanings when viewed through the scrim of genre. A common clichè among women poets and those who wrote about them was the link between literary talent and early death, epitomized in the idea that the most brilliant women inevitably died young. These ideas may well have been fueled by the likes of Xiaoqing 小青 and Ye Xiaoluan 葉小鸞--semi-fictionalized beauties whose talent was blamed for their early demise. Hou herself resorts to this type of thinking in accounting for Jiang Zhu's relatively early passing. Here she reasons that female talent is likely to incite the jealousy of "the creator," who would not mind if a man were talented but who is perturbed when talent assumes female form. In Hou's case the strong possibility that she never laid eyes on Jiang makes the automatic assumption of that Jiang was beautiful all the more remarkable, underscoring the strength of the fascination with--but also the taboo against--any sign of female striving in a male-dominated genre.

Even as a poet, Hou had something to gain from her poor health. After 1794, it allowed her to excuse herself from household duties and activated Hou Yunjin's eagerness to communicate her work to women like Lo Qilan and Wang Qiong. Yet it appears to have been with relief that Hou professed mediocrity in this genre. As she notes, perhaps only in modesty, this meant that "the creator" would not claim her before her time. In the realm of *tanci*, on the other hand, talent was not correlated with early death. Quite the contrary, her role as *tanci* author was said to have made her healthier, giving her the means to occupy herself while

she was bed-ridden. Since other women authors did not claim improved health as a result of writing *tanci*, this association may have been unique to Hou. Sickliness also could be used to explain how she found so much time to give to her writing. When Hou worked on her various *tanci*, she was between 47 and 60 years of age, which is to say, not beyond the pale of responsibility for domestic chores. Her chronic but not immediately fatal illness provided her with convenient cover, and she could have emphasized it on this score. Quite unlike those female poets whose genius doomed them to die early, Hou used writing to stabilizing fragile health and used fragile health, or at least the rhetoric thereof, as a means of justifying her decade-long involvement with the *tanci* form.

This look at Hou's poems and prefaces cannot be said to resolve every problem posed by her peculiar combination of virtuous Confucianism and literary entrepreneurship. The issues of ambition and poor health illuminate her transition away from poetry and into a more narrative style of writing, despite some ambiguity about where biographical fact ends and rhetorical pose begins. Where the new material brings greatest clarity is in Hou's relationship to the idea that lack of talent in a woman is a virtue. Schooled in this precept from a young age, she was patently capable of thinking her way around it, conforming and not conforming at the same time. It was this combination of conformity and defiance that allowed her both to give vent to women's escapist fantasies in her writing and push values that, in logic, should have prevented her from writing *tanci* at all. Hou's cousin, Hou Yunjin, clearly played the role of mentor in this negotiation. Like one of the male prefacers to Jiang Zhu's poems, he too must have "particularly hated the truism 'lack of talent in a woman is a virtue.'"[32] His ongoing commitment to her education, her children's education, and her writing stands out as the mainstay of all she managed

---

[32] This is the opening line of the preface by Xu Yu.

to do.

It is only slightly more difficult to connect Hou Yunjin to Hou Zhi's major literary innovation, her decision not just to rewrite and write but to publish *tanci*. The role of her brothers in furthering her education comes up for comment in her narratives, but nowhere do they say exactly how her outreach to publishers was connected to Yunjin or any other brother. Given the extent of Yunjin's dedication to her writing, it is inconceivable that he did not know of her switch to *tanci*, which consumed more than a decade of her writing time. Hou Yunjin is likely also to have expedited her contact with popular publishers, whether or not he was the sole initiator of such ties. Hard evidence for this assertion is still lacking, but it is a plausible inference from the record that survives today.

※I am grateful to Hu Siao-chen and Patrick Hanan for suggestions and corrections.

Bibliography

Chen Shi 陳詩, *Wanya chuji* 皖雅初集, Shanghai: Lujiang Chenshi, 1932.

Fa-shi-shan 法式善, *Wumen shihua* 梧門詩話, Shen Yunlong, ed., *Jindai zhongguo shiliao congkan xubian* 20, vol. 198, Taibei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1975.

Goyama Kiwamu, "En Bai to jodeishi tachi," *Bungaku ronsh/u*, 31 (August, 1985), pp. 113–54.

Hou Zhi 侯芝, *Jingui jie* 金閨傑, 1824.

Hu Shiying 胡士瑩, "Tanci nü zuojia Hou Zhi xiaozhuan 彈詞女作家侯芝小傳," *Wenxian* 文獻 15 (1983), pp. 87–93.

Hu Wenkai 胡文楷, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考, rev. ed., Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1985.

Jiang Zhu 江珠, *Xiaoweimo shiji* 小維摩詩集, 1811.

Jin Ruolan 金若蘭, *Huayuxuan shichao* 花語軒詩鈔, 1807.

Ko, Dorothy, "A Man Teaching Ten Women: A Case in the Making of Gender Relations in Eighteenth-Century China," *Yanagida Setsuko sensei koki kinen ronsh/u hensh/u i-inkai, ed, Ch/ugoku no dent/o shakai to kazoku (Society and Family in Traditional China)*, Tokyo: Ky/uko shoin, 1993, pp. 65–93.

Lo Qilan 駱綺蘭, *Tingqiuguan guizhong tongrenji* 聽秋館閨中同人集, 1797.

Lo Qilan, *Tingqiuguan shiji* 聽秋館詩集, 1795.

Mei Zengliang 梅曾亮, *Baijian shanfang wenji* 柏梘山房文集 *5, Zhonghua wenshi congkan* 154–55, Taibei: Huawenshuji, 1969.

Siao-chen Hu, "Literary Tanci: A Woman's Tradition of Narrative in Verse," unpublished doctoral dissertation (Harvard University, 1994).

Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧, *Zhongguo nüxing wenxue shihua* 中國女性文學史話, Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1984.

Wang Qiong 王瓊, *Ailanxuan shixuan* 愛蘭軒詩選, 1807.

Wang Yu 王豫, *Qunya ji* 群雅集, second collection, 1811.

Yuan Mei 袁枚, "Xu tongrenji 續同人集," *Suiyuan quanji* 隨園全集, Shanghai: Wenming shuju, 1918.

Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, *Zhongguo suwenxue shi* 中國俗文學史, Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1957.